

WITNESS QUESTIONS FOR BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON CHILD  
PROTECTION  
OCTOBER 18<sup>TH</sup>

1. *Introductory and Framing Comments: Please describe your areas of involvement in child welfare and the primary points that you would like to share with the Commission to fulfill its mission of improving the system.*

I am Olivia Rodriguez, Executive Director of the Los Angeles County Domestic Violence Council, and I am here representing that Council which is comprised of members from shelter agencies, community groups, the courts, law enforcement, the District Attorney's office, L.A. City Attorney's office, Public Defender, DCFS, Department of Public Health, legal services agencies, and providers of services within the LGBT community and gang violence prevention agencies as each pertains to domestic violence awareness, prevention, intervention and education.

The Council facilitates interdepartmental coordination of services, and serves as a forum to raise public awareness of services and develop strategies with the public and private sectors to stem the incidence of domestic violence. The Council makes recommendations regarding public information, training, legislation, education, and subsequent program development in these areas.

The Council reviews systems within the county to improve the delivery of services to children exposed to violence and has worked with DCFS to provide training to employees in 2012 and in previous years to identify staff that will be experts in assessing the cycle of violence in families. This includes a safety appraisal of the at-risk parents as well as the children. We have worked closely with Xiomara Flores-Holguin, DCFS Children's Social Worker Supervisor to convene meetings and to develop a plan to involve domestic violence advocates to be the expert liaisons within the department to provide the guidance and assistance to the staff that do not have the necessary experience or knowledge in domestic violence cases, including their presence at Children's Court. We also have worked closely with Commissioner Jacqueline H. Lewis to conduct Dependency Court training and invited domestic violence prevention and intervention experts to participate in providing training that took place in 2012, to over 200 DCFS employees with minimal support.

2. *Major Impediments: What are your major impediments to improving child safety?*

Los Angeles County has the knowledge, leadership, economic resources, and expertise to effectively intervene on behalf of children exposed to violence. By forming strong collaboratives of domestic violence experts and key decision makers in DCFS, we can ensure that DCFS staff is educated to recognize and deal with domestic violence in families. More critically, we can assist DCFS staff in analyzing the dynamic in a family to determine whether or not there is a non-offending parent and, if there is, to protect and support that parent.

The challenge that we have experienced in forging strong liaisons with the department is the lack of consistency in leadership and the fact that the majority of DCFS management and workers alike do not acknowledge the existence of domestic violence in the majority of the cases. Furthermore, the problem of domestic violence never has permeated the overall policies and procedures of the department even though, in the Los Angeles County 2008 child death review, 13 of the 14 cases were domestic violence-related and, in 2011, 9 cases were domestic violence-related.

The other challenge or obstacle is that the department charged with protecting children has difficulty in recognizing that children exposed to domestic violence may be considered to be abused – at least emotionally – whether or not they are the direct target of that abuse, and that dynamic must be taken into consideration when making recommendations regarding custody.

*3. Recommendations for Improvement: What recommendations might you share for improvements in the system? If you were to create an ideal system that would allow children to be safe and grow up mentally and physically healthy, what would that system look like? What would your organization's role be? What would the greatest obstacles to implementing this ideal system be?*

An understanding of the intersection between domestic violence and child abuse is a critical factor that is needed. Once knowledge on the impact of trauma is considered to be as important as how to fill out paperwork, then there will be a paradigm shift within the department that protects children in practice and not just on paper.

We seek to reach out to DCFS to form a collective investment in defending children from exposure to violence and psychological trauma. We desire the commitment of DCFS supervisors and managers to participate in training provided by experts from our field to understand the cycle of violence and ensure that the assessments for identifying families at risk are properly administered and that treatment and other crucial services for children exposed to violence and psychological trauma are provided. Families experiencing domestic violence must be referred to agencies that have expertise in this highly specialized field with case plans that address the effects of trauma and safety issues, not just a check list on a form that does not allow space for information pertaining to the incident of domestic violence.

The DVC is willing to and has provided opportunities for DCFS staff to establish relationships with domestic violence shelter-based agencies so that families are linked to resources, including transportation, childcare, employment, food, clothing, housing, legal and social services. It is critical to understand that frequently survivors need a wide variety of resources to successfully leave a batterer. They may have limited resources to provide for themselves and their children, especially if they have been in an abusive relationship for a long time. They may need specialized services or assistance to fully heal from the abuse.

We recommend that the Director, Mr. Philip Browning carve out a newly created 'policy manager' position in the department. This full-time individual will coordinate training, ensure policy implementation, work in conjunction with the Domestic Violence Council, and have the authority to implement policies that ensure that a domestic violence analysis is an integral part of each case.

Also necessary would be the development and placement of subordinate domestic violence expert mentors at the various Service Planning Area (SPA/s) offices. Creation of joint DVC/DCFS case conferencing that address and develop remedies for the domestic violence/child abuse issues that arise is a logical corollary. Quarterly training for DCFS employees on the intersection of domestic violence and child abuse would enable child protective services to keep current on policies, changes in community resources available, legislation and best practices tools in assisting families to seek and maintain standards of care.

The failure to acknowledge and recognize the domestic violence context in which child abuse occurs perpetuates an intergenerational cycle of violence. All the training in the world is of little effect if the agency lacks a protocol that inculcates from the top to the bottom of the chain of command an understanding of the various manifestations of domestic violence including not only physical abuse but coercive control. An understanding of the intersection between domestic violence and child abuse is a critical factor that is needed to affect a paradigm shift.

Every child abuse case must be analyzed for domestic violence and service plans with options tailored to the family. Each plan needs to be domestic violence informed with safety as a top priority. Resources need to be appropriately assigned without penalizing the protective parent. Institutionalizing an analysis for domestic violence as an integral part of reviewing child abuse cases is a wise expenditure of funds – for prevention rather than funerals and lawsuits.

3. **Best Practices:** What best practices would you recommend that the Commission review? What are "promising practices" both from within the County and around the county?

A child welfare system that recognizes domestic violence creates a service plan that is appropriate for each family and recognizes a protective parent if there is one. Members of the DVC have the experience and expertise to partner with the Department of Children and Family Services to inform its creation of appropriate plans that can be implemented successfully.

The Los Angeles County Domestic Violence Council and ICAN collaborated with experts to develop the "Guidelines to Effective Response to Domestic Abuse" (GERDA), a portion of the guidelines pertains to child protective services, and we urge that these be finalized and adopted. This would be an opportunity not only for a workable collaboration with DVC but also a huge step toward implementing a protocol that analyzes each child abuse case for domestic violence.

Commissioner Jacqueline H. Lewis worked with a task force to implement guidelines in Dependency Court titled "Guidelines in "Domestic Violence in Dependency Cases: A Judge's Guide" - <http://serranus.courtinfo.ca.gov>

Report of the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence – December 12, 2012

California State Auditor: Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, Management Instability Hampered Efforts to Better protect Children – march 2013 Report 2011-2012

Effective Intervention in Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment Cases: Guidelines for Policy and Practice <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/sr/greenbook/report.pdf>.

"The Batterer as Parent" (book), Lundy Bancroft and Jay G. Silverman

The Domestic Violence Council believes that the best ways to help others that are caught in the cycle of violence is with hope and healing and provide them with wrap around services, and to form partnerships with key county departments, work together with the community, with law enforcement, and elected officials.

We look forward to working collaboratively with the Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection in making recommendations on innovative strategies, research-informed practices, and strategic partnerships that foster safety, permanence, and child and family well-being in the family.

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